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CONFERENCE REPORT

Language Policy in Southern Africa: Perspectives From Three International Conferences

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Decisions concerning language use in Africa are highly sensitive and fraught with explosive political and social potential because, among other things, Africa is extraordinarily multilingual. Joseph Greenberg[1] has calculated that half the known languages of the world are found on that one continent. Individual countries, like Nigeria or Cameroon, contain within them literally hundreds of languages, and no African country has the simplicity of monolingualism. In West and East Africa, the inevitable if reluctant solution for post-independence national unity has been to retain the colonial European language as the language of government and therefore of national unity. The positive convenience and utility of this language policy has until now tended to outweigh its negative imperial associations, but increasingly it is being challenged by the demand for mother tongue education. Nevertheless, even where resented the need for European languages, including English, remains.

Two countries, South West Africa/Namibia and the Republic of South Africa, were not part of the earlier historic winds of change that created most of the present African states. They came to independence belatedly, albeit in different guises, and are now being forced to confront the question of language choice. During the summer of 1991, universities in both these countries hosted conferences, inviting international specialists (in various fields) to air the options which should be considered by the politicians and decision-makers.

The first meeting was held in Windhoek, the capital of what used to be known as South West Africa but is now renamed

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Namibia. A German colony in the late 19th century, evidence of Namibia's colonial history remains in its architecture, religion, dress, and language. When the Germans were defeated by South African forces during the 1914-1919 war, South Africa was given a supervising mandate over South West Africa by the League of Nations. Despite the official condemnation of South Africa by the United Nations, South African authority was retained until the modern-day complicated deal that linked the granting of Namibia's independence to the departure of Cuban forces from Angola. It was the South West African People's Organization (SWAPO) which took power in Namibia after the first national elections, and these are the leaders now exploring the language policy options for an independent Namibia.

The Department of Linguistics at the newly formed University of Namibia convened the conference under the title "Language Ecology in Africa." It became clear at the conference that "ecology" was intended to refer to the threatened indigenous languages that needed protection, like elephants and the rain forests. To that end there were several markedly specialized papers, such as "Prospects for the Future of Seyeyi" (a language spoken by 10,000 people in Botswana), "The Sub-Cluster of Tonga/Toka Languages: Subiya, Fwe, Totela, and Mbalan," "A Phonological History of Yeyi," "Dialects of Koekhoe, !Xuu and Zul'hoasi." A larger audience, however, attended the papers which addressed the more immediate and realistic difficulties confronting the Namibian government, whether by direct suggestion or by comparative reference to the experiences of other countries, such as Malawi, Uganda, Rwanda, Benin, Nigeria, and, more remotely, Papua New Guinea.

The problem of language policy facing Namibia derives from the early expressed determination of the SWAPO leadership, when still in exile, that English should be the language of the new state when they took power. This decision was endorsed by the United Nations, despite the policy having little to say concerning the crucial issue of the potential roles that African languages might play in an independent Namibia and despite it having dangerously arbitrary dimensions. As Theo Du Plessis of the Urban Foundation put it, "the document prepared during the years of the liberation struggle on future language policy . . . was never contested" (Du Plessis, 1991)

As many of the readers may know, this author has made a career out of advocating the advantages of just such a policy--of asserting the primacy of English as the vehicle for economic

progress--from experiences in countries as diverse as Togo and Somalia. Prior to arriving at the conference he had prepared his usual peroration endorsing the Priority of English Principle expressed by SWAPO. But on this occasion his presentation (Povey, 1991) lacked his usual missionary fervor, for there proved to be two snags: another fully effective national and regional language already existed, and, unfortunately, virtually no one in Namibia spoke English!

Afrikaans, though tainted with its South African association, was almost universally spoken as a first or second language in Namibia, and, for seventy years, the entire administration of government had been effectively conducted in that language. Residual German was suppressed, reduced, as one conference paper lamented, to such marginalia as "The Lost Umlaut." In line with the new English-only policy of the independent government, however, Afrikaans TV, radio, and newspapers were abolished by blatant acts of brutal linguistic disenfranchisement.

At the conference, this violence was challenged by V. Peeters, of the Belgian Foundation for the Study of Plural Societies. He was restrained from giving his paper in Afrikaans and thus was able to claim linguistic oppression and a prejudgment of the policy question, though given the international makeup of the audience his immediate claim was somewhat tendentious. Nevertheless, philosophically Peeters's views remained both passionate and challenging with global and local implications. In one extraordinary excoriation he declared that "monolingualism is utopia, though all governments prefer and seek it, refusing to believe it is impossible." Peeters then went on to argue that only law can aid minority groups because majority democracy constitutes as powerful a threat to them as totalitarianism. He advanced the provocative paradox that, for minorities, "Freedom oppresses. The law sets free" (Peeters, 1991).

The next stage of debate at the conference addressed the question that if English were to be imposed, what form should it take? George Wilcox of the United States Information Service, who luckily escaped being called out on the charge of sexism, reported his incomprehension of his (female) secretary's UK-style complaint that she had "a ladder in her tights." He saw in this anecdote a basis for providing a series of helpful parallel Americanisms ('a run in her panty-hose'?) that might be added to Namibian vocabularies (Wilcox, 1991).

Several senior, usually European, language policy advisors to the Namibian Ministry of Education spoke of the practical hurdles that they were encountering. R. L. Trewby described the difficulties of implementing educational policies "where decisions are made by government officials or politicians" (Trewby, 1991). These working administrators sat through the conference presentations doubtless in the unfulfilled hope that they would receive illuminating and practical advice, but academics, as usual, preferred to delineate problems and to call for further research!

This author's attendance at the Namibia conference was abbreviated by bizarre circumstance. Roughly roused from early morning slumber by agents of the United States government, he was evicted from his room to make space for Vice-President Dan Quayle, who was arriving on a "fact-finding" mission. Confronted by a night on the sidewalk, this author preferred to depart for a second conference in Cape Town, South Africa. But, by doing so, he was unable to attend two important scheduled activities. One was an event organized by the American Embassy: participants were linked by satellite to discuss "A Draft Language Policy of Namibia" with Carol Myers Scotton in Washington, DC. More lamentably, the author missed the second event: an organized tour of the Windhoek breweries with its promise of ample free samples.

The South African conference, "Democratic Approaches to Language Planning and Standardisation," assembled in the beautiful mountain garden setting of the University of Cape Town. The "ecology" theme of the previous conference had sensitized one to the innuendoes of an agenda hidden by semantics, but one wondered about the relation between language policy and democracy, especially after Dr. Peeters's impassioned warning that democracy may well impose language tyranny.

Unlike SWAPO, the leaders of the African National Congress (ANC) in South Africa have not declared a language preference, as November (1991) recently confirmed. This avoidance has probably resulted because most members of the ANC are Xhosa speakers, while Zulu is the majority indigenous language. Nevertheless, the conference program was printed in three languages: English, Afrikaans, and Xhosa, the latter the predominating indigenous language in the Cape area.

The organization of this meeting was deliberately activist, for it was quite specifically declared in the conference program that "this conference is part of a national initiative to involve community, labour and professional organizations in the debate over a language

policy for a democratic South Africa." (One notes that linguists were not specifically included in the argument!) Appropriately, the three North American participants, Arthur J. More, Bronwyn Norton Peirce, and Barbara Toye Welsh, were all Canadians involved with "Native Language Programs" in British Columbia and Ontario.

There were few plenary presentations. Attendees were instead allocated to twenty workshops where they were required to discuss specific issues and make reports and recommendations for the policy options facing South Africa as it moves towards its new definition of independence. The author joined the group led by a graduate from UCLA's TESL program, Qedusizi Buthelezi, of the University of Witwatersrand in Johannesburg, because it was the only workshop which specifically included the word "English" in its title, though one suspected that the workshop entitled "Language Policy and Gender Sensitivity" was more likely to derive from American than African perturbations. The key question we were required to contest in our workshop was "How can we ensure that English is accessible to all, rather than to the exclusive reserve of the elite?" The initially undefined term "democracy" was now being clearly measured as majority. Certainly the word was much bandied about in the various session titles, including the one this author attended, "English in a Democratic South Africa."

Ironically, the link between English and democracy was precisely reversed in the Namibian situation. There, English was to be imposed despotically rather than democratically. In South Africa, English has a long indigenous history. It was first introduced in 1815 as a deliberate counter to Afrikaans. After so many years it should have taken root and become culturally neutral, as it has in Nigeria. There is, after all, even a lengthy specialized dictionary of South African English (Branford, 1987). At this meeting, however, it became clear that English was perceived as potentially oppressive because English was, as many expressed it, still a colonial language which carried with it "the baggage of imperialism," and because English was guilty of having the potential to be a juggernaut, powerful enough to eliminate and replace the legitimate function of African languages. That had been a familiar enough view in West Africa, but it seemed surprising in South Africa where English has had such a long history and had consistently been the language of anti-apartheid radicalism.

One paper recognized the conflict by asking whether if English was "the de facto language of the trade union's

administration" (which was most certainly true) that such uniform usage would succeed in "disempowering the working class as a whole." One view, that the inevitable future shift of political and economic power from white to black might make English less essential, was a dream pursued with disastrous lack of success in Tanzania. But several counters to this generalized anti-English resentment were advanced. It was pointed out, for instance, that if one considered English usage to be measured by "whose variety," rather than "which variety," its usage could be legitimized, that local usage could reverse the common practice of asserting linguistic principles from above and "filter up from grass roots to the policy makers," and that regional varieties of English might eliminate its threatening elitist aspect and democratize English. In such a context, it was argued, English could become "the property of the people," people, of course, being the unassailable reference to democracy. The practice, it was concluded, would result in a drastically limited international utility, but that appeared to be an acceptable price to pay for linguistic democracy.

The difficulty in such a position, however, is the inevitable necessity of English and, generally, the unlikelihood that any indigenous language can serve as a single unifying social force or in any full-service function. In most multilingual contexts, the greater the multilingualism the more the political penalties. For South Africa, a most subtle linguistic argument was put forward to offset the complexity in a brilliant and persuasive lecture by Neil Alexander of the National Language Project at the University of Cape Town. Alexander argued that the indigenous language situation in South Africa was not comparable to circumstances in other countries. It had none of the astounding complexities of Cameroon, for instance, where four main language groups existed. Democratization, now defined as meaning "making a place for African languages," might be possible, Alexander asserted, if the various South African tongues could be reconciled, since with minor exceptions they all had the underlying connection of being Bantu in origin. Alexander also asserted that such "harmonisation" was a practical proposition for two language groups: Nguni (including Xhosa, Zulu, Swazi, and Ndebele) and Sotho (including Tswana, South Sotho, and North Sotho). Alexander's research indicated that "there is no theoretical or intrinsically linguistic reason why a project to harmonise and modernise . . . cannot be undertaken." While this prospect would certainly have revolutionary social impact on South Africa, Alexander thinks that in the long-term the process might take

"one or two generations" to be successful (Alexander, 1991). Indeed, the reconciliation of closely related languages would eventually reduce apparent multilingualism to an educationally manageable bilingual situation and perhaps become a pattern for other African countries.

After the Cape Town conference, the author returned via Johannesburg, to visit the University of Witwatersrand, an alma mater. It was significant to see how yet another institution had learned that serious work in language studies depended on a separation from the formal Department of English with its exclusive focus on literature. A new "English" department with a new chair was recently established whose mission is introducing not only new courses in the study of English language but also a new attitude (on this excellent but traditional campus) towards the essential social aspects of English studies. These changes will hopefully create a balance between the desires of the activists and the interests of the academics. That, in itself, would constitute a healthy and productive intellectual tension at Witwatersrand.

The author's stopover in Nairobi, Kenya should have been a time for R and R, but the local newspaper headlines informed readers that "Dons Grapple with the Pitfalls of Language," so it was on to another conference! At Moi University, the theme was "The Creative Use of Language in a Multilingual Society." This serendipitous opportunity to attend a meeting in another region of Africa provided a fascinating contrast to the South African fretfulness about English and "democracy," for the debate in Kenya turned on other issues.

Some years ago, for political reasons, Kenya declared Swahili to be the national language. This policy did not greatly interfere with the inevitable acceptance of English as a communicative vehicle within the society, but common usage ultimately engendered various localisms and variants of English expression. The concern voiced at the Moi conference, however, was not the desire for indigenization that had motivated the South African debate. Quite the contrary: Kendo Sure, of the University of Nairobi, presented a carefully researched paper which lamented "falling standards" of English, by which he meant the gradual loss of standardized English competencies (Sure, 1991). Sure spoke of "factors impeding the acquisition and use of English" and even took the controversial position that Africans make "grammatical mistakes." Chris Wanjala, also of the University of Nairobi, offered an illustrative anecdote in support of this view (Wanjala,

1991). Recently he had been in England conducting an interview, and he required an interpreter as intermediary, though he is a highly regarded professor of English!

The conclusion drawn at the Nairobi conference was as logical as it was surprising: "English should be written and spoken in such a way that there is communication between Kenyans and the international community." This view seems an inescapable aim if English remains the global lingua franca. And if English can bring a country like Kenya into the global mainstream, does that make such a policy less "democratic?"

After Nairobi, your author was clearly conferenced out, but he was glad to have been at an additional meeting in still another African country, conducted with such anxious vehemence, that provided still further evidence of the desperately important linguistic questions that continue to provoke Africa: What language shall be used, and what are the consequences to be suffered from accepting any of the choices available? It almost puts the debates over Californian bilingualism into simpler perspective.

NOTES

[1] Professor Greenberg is at Stanford University's Department of Linguistics.

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